

La Quinceañera:
Performances of Race, Culture, Class and Religion in the
Somerville Community

Sara Arcaya

Assisted by Somerville Charter High School Student:

Bianca Salazar

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Introduction

“Más que tradición religiosa, es una tradición del pueblo, ve, y claro cada tradición del pueblo y cada cultura trae consigo lo que toda la vida vivieron,” according to Daisy Gómez, this is the quinceañera. The quinceañera is at once a tradition in a community—a reminder of its depth and history—while still an ever-changing celebration. It is a tradition of the people, a lived experience that evolves with those who practice it. This paper is the culmination of seven interviews with members of the Somerville, Massachusetts Latino community and is one part of an on-going project to record and make available that community’s oral history.

Somerville is a city that lies along the Mystic River, five miles north of Boston. Most Tufts students think of Somerville as Davis Square, which is a ten-minute walk from campus. However, a short drive through Winter Hill and into East Somerville reveals quite a different community. Rather than seeing working class white residents whose Somerville ties extend back generations, or Tufts alumnae who have found jobs in nearby Cambridge, one is more likely to meet Salvadorans who have immigrated to the U.S. within the last twenty-five years. Restaurants like Tapatío and Los Paisanos are the significant places rather than the Joshua Tree and Starbucks. And the dominant language shifts from English to Spanish.

Somerville’s predominately Salvadoran Latino population began to grow in the 1980s, when Central America experienced violent civil wars in three countries—Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Elena Letona, Cambridge community organizer

at Centro Presente, refers to this immigration wave as an “exodus,” claiming that between 1990 and 2000 the Salvadoran community in Massachusetts grew 139%. According to “Who Are New England’s Immigrants?” close to one in three Somerville residents are foreign born, most of whom are Salvadoran or Brazilian (Mammie and Ricardo). Excluded under the U.S.’s Refugee Act of 1980, Salvadorans existed in a sort of limbo with regards to their political status—provisionally protected under temporary protected status, settlement, or workers’ visas. By 1986 Somerville joined about twenty other cities that pledged to protect illegal immigrants fleeing Central America’s civil wars, proclaiming itself a Sanctuary City. As Elaina Letona explains, Salvadorans in Massachusetts, as other immigrant communities, are not organized around geography, but around ethnicity. Many Salvadorans, because of Somerville’s willingness to accept them regardless of their official immigration status, established roots in the city, making it more feasible for friends, families, and even entire communities to join.

A Tufts University class now in its third year, Urban Borderlands, introduced me to this community. The goal of this anthropology class is to document the oral history of Somerville Latinos and to teach students about conducting qualitative research through one-on-one interviews. The fall 2004 class is looking at the arrival and integration of Latinos into Somerville through eight research topics including that of businesspeople, religious life, and youth programs, all co-occurring with my own study on quinceañeras. While many students at Tufts can basically get by without descending “the hill” for four years, Urban Borderlands forces students to learn by experience. The class brings students into the community, allowing them to understand first hand the local politics, social issues, and customs. Little or none of this would otherwise make headlines at

Tufts. The class met several times in the community, working in special partnership with The Welcome Project, an advocacy agency run by Nelson Salazar. Located in Somerville's Mystic Public Housing Development, The Welcome Project has dedicated itself to serving immigrant populations and facilitating their integration into Somerville since 1987. Students from the Urban Borderlands class were paired with high school students connected to The Welcome Project in order to conduct research and gain entrance into the Somerville Latino community.

My partner, Bianca Salazar, daughter of Nelson Salazar, is currently a junior at Somerville Charter High School. Bianca was especially helpful for a number of reasons: Bianca speaks Spanish fluently and knows her community. She largely inspired this research topic and agreed to let me interview her. In one of my first meetings with Bianca she described her quinceañera, which took place two years earlier. She was still excited about it. I wondered what purpose the quinceañera served on the community level, why it continues to thrive across borders and cultures, how it has affected Somerville, and how Somerville has affected it.

When the Urban Borderland reports are assembled into a comprehensive study of Somerville's Latino population, many chapters will reveal a community largely excluded from Somerville proper. It faces constant discrimination, has virtually no political representation, and has low home ownership rates. To be accurate, the book will also need to reflect the positive aspects that make a cohesive community. This chapter would reveal everyday life for Latinos in Somerville, what they value, and how these values translate into cultural events.

One such traditional celebration is the quinceañera, a coming of age ceremony for fifteen-year-old Latinas and Latin Americans. Because of the economic, racial, and cultural diversity among these societies, the quinceañera can take many forms. It most typically involves, however, both a religious and social ceremony in which the honoree gives thanks to God, the Virgin Mary, her family, and her social circle for having brought her thus far in life. While the quinceañera has often been compared to the Sweet Sixteens and Debutante Balls of Anglo Americans, C.C.D. director Daisy Gómez insists that it has nothing to do with these other coming of age celebrations. It is instead a Hispanic religious event that sustains and invigorates communities and takes unique shape in the context of Somerville. This project is truly a collaborative one involving the Urban Borderlands class, Bianca Salazar, The Welcome Project, and greater Somerville.

Objectives

The goal of this paper is to look from an anthropological perspective at the long held tradition of quinceañeras in the context of Somerville's Latino community. Each interview, though broad in its subject matter, was guided by the overarching question: what purpose does the quinceañera serve in Somerville? Their community and unique places in society have of course influenced the respondents; their statements reflect their views alone and should not be interpreted as reflections of all of Somerville. The report explores how the narrators' performance of the tradition reflects their unique locations in society, as members of a marginalized and economically disadvantaged group with close ties to their sending nations. Hardly passive participants, Somerville Latinos have collectively influenced the shape of this longstanding cultural tradition, one that now

incorporates local values and bicultural influences. It also reflects how the community perceives itself.

Narrators' statements were largely in tune with Saint Benedict's C.C.D. director, Daisy Gómez's assertion. The quinceañera is a lived experience that moves with the people who practice it—something that is at once constant, a reminder of the depth and history of one's culture, and still dynamic, reflecting the daily reality of Somerville Latinos. The following report details those elements of the quinceañera that the narrators found were of notable significance to them. It also contends that the quinceañera continues in Somerville because it actively creates and strengthens the community.

Methodology

During two and a half months, I conducted seven interviews for this project, three in conjunction with Bianca Salazar my high school contact. The first few interviews were contained within the Welcome Project network, but as one narrator introduced me to the next, and so on, I began extending my reach into the greater community. The topics of each interview included the religious significance of a quinceañera, the economic factors involved, and the concepts of beauty and femininity the custom reveals. Each interview took place in Somerville—in the Welcome Project, narrators' homes, at a local business, and in Saint Benedict's parish—and lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes. I entered each interview with a set of questions specific to my narrator and his or her role in the quinceañera tradition, conducting the conversation in either Spanish or English, as per his or her preference. Most interviews took the form of personal stories much more than a strict question and answer exchange. The narrators all signed consent forms giving me rights to their interviews for the purpose of this oral history project.

As the project progressed, my focus became narrower. I began adding questions, asking narrators to comment on concepts and trends explained in past interviews, and about conclusions I was generating. My focus population also began to take shape as I realized that at least six out of seven of my narrators were part of Saint Benedict's congregation. Given that religion is especially tied to the Somerville Salvadoran quinceañera, the Saint Benedict's connection became a significant element of my report and tied narrators' experiences to one institution and religious community.

Since this project only covered one semester, I was limited as to the amount of material I could gather. There is certainly more work to be done. There are many other communities within the Somerville Latino population, as well as countless other areas of which one could conduct research. This is a population largely ignored by the public eye, though with a wealth of experiences and knowledge to share. At the conclusion of this report, I will suggest further areas of study.

List of Narrators

Heidy Castro is twenty-one years old and of Salvadoran descent. She was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1983 and was raised in Somerville. She currently has a two-year old son and lives with her family a short distance from The Welcome Project. Heidy is an active parishioner at Saint Benedict's and was introduced to me by the religious director there, Daisy Gómez.

Milagro Garcia, owner of Doña Milagro's in Somerville, emigrated from El Salvador on May 4, 1988. Doña Milagro's specializes in women's formalwear, selling dresses for weddings, quinceañeras, and graduation celebrations. She draws an entirely Latino clientele and has participated in the oral history project once before, for a study called "The Latino Business Community in Somerville, MA" by David Pistrang and Emily Chasan. I do not know whether Milagro Garcia attends Saint Benedict's Parish.

Daisy Gómez immigrated to the United States in 1957 from Cuba. She has been living in Dorchester, Massachusetts for over forty years, though is closely tied to the Somerville community. As director of religious education and assistant to the pastor at Saint Benedict's, she is in charge of almost all projects the parish undertakes with respect to the Somerville Hispanic community.

Berta Guevara is a Salvadoran woman who immigrated to the United States in 1993 and has since become an active member of the Saint Benedict's congregation. Berta is an

instructor at the religious school, a lector during Sunday mass, and takes care of many administrative tasks.

Bianca Salazar is seventeen years old and currently a junior at the Somerville Charter High School. She is a Salvadoran Latina who had her quinceañera two years prior to this report. Both my high school partner and one of my seven narrators, Bianca was the first to provide the essential perspective of a quinceañera honoree, giving my study both depth and direction. She also suggested that I get to know Saint Benedict's and interview the CCD director.

Nelson Salazar, father of Bianca Salazar, is founder and director of Somerville's The Welcome Project. He immigrated to the United States from Sonsonante, El Salvador in 1980. Nelson Salazar and The Welcome Project have been working with Urban Borderlands for two years now, pairing high school and college students to learn about and document the Somerville Latino population's oral history.

Jessica Tejada is seventeen years old, of Salvadoran descent, and a junior at the Somerville Charter High School. She is connected to the Urban Borderlands class through The Welcome Project and has been interviewing the Somerville Latino business community as part of a study entitled, "The Latino Business Community and the City of Somerville."

*“From girl to señorita. It was a way to present them to society—
the upper-class society”*

Chapter 1: Symbols of Womanhood in the Quinceañera

While the focus of this paper lies in exploring the current purpose of the quinceañera in Somerville, a basic understanding of its roots gives insight into the tradition’s current form. According to Nelson Salazar, quinceañeras came to the Americas with the Spaniards, who had adopted the tradition from the French. Although Mr. Salazar attributes the tradition to Spain, not all sources agree. There is apparently no conclusive evidence of this exchange. “Quinceañera presentations are unknown in Spain, and even in the sixteenth century court presentations were more akin to...presentation balls of particular groups, like fraternal organizations or to social events, like debutante balls,” (Cantú 1999) the religious ceremony sets quinceañeras apart from these secular functions. Others like Norma E. Cantú have claimed, though this did not come up in any of my interviews, that at least some portion of the quinceañera can be traced back to indigenous roots. She says that while the pendant typically given to an honoree on her fifteenth birthday and blessed during the religious ceremony symbolizes “coming-of-age, it also functions as an identity marker that focuses her attention on her cultural heritage and establishes a direct link to her indigenous past” (Cantú 2002). Regardless of the quinceañera’s first incorporation into Latin/o cultures, it now consistently signals coming of age, in both a social and religious sense.

Traditionally, quinceañeras signal a female's transformation, "from girl to señorita. It was a way to present them to society—the upper-class society," Mr. Salazar says. Although the Salazars are by no means wealthy, He says that quinceañeras "became a tradition for a lot of us." Given that Somerville's Salvadoran population is quite recent, working class, and still establishing itself in the city, the tradition has veered from its original presentation of a girl to society. Storeowner Milagro Garcia believes that now only Brazilians maintain this perspective in Somerville. Salvadorans and many other Latin American groups, she said, place greater emphasis on the more general concept of coming of age. One honoree, Heidy Castro, similarly acknowledged the social connotation of the quinceañera and a young woman's presentation to society. She, however, places higher value on the way that it presents a young woman to the parish and to God. It is as if she is "entregando su juventud a Dios—una juventud sana," (giving her youth to God, her healthy youth), through the religious ceremony, Heidy explained. Coming of age in a specifically religious context, however, will be treated in a later chapter.

The celebration also entails a secular concept of coming of age and reflects an infusion of cultural markers of this maturity. Milagro Garcia indicates one such marker, the crown. Mexican girls, she asserts, signal personal growth as they enter the church wearing a "corona de adolescente" and leave wearing a "corona de señorita," to signal that they are ready for suitors and have entered womanhood—but that's another culture, she clarified. Symbolizing this transformation into a señorita, Heidy's father, once they arrived at Saint Anthony's Church for her party, ceremonially, before all of the guests, removed her flat shoes and replaced them with high heels. She also pointed out that

some mothers give their daughters a doll for the last time on the quinceañera as a keepsake. Though Bianca did not incorporate either of these traditions into her quinceañera, she too believes the event marks coming of age saying, “It was pretty much saying that now I had become a young lady, that I was entering high school, and that I was no longer a child.” All narrators mentioned that the quinceañera symbolizes one’s passage from youth into womanhood, though their concepts of womanhood certainly differ.

In describing their understanding of womanhood, Bianca and Heidy placed special emphasis on responsibility. As a teenage female now ready to have boyfriends, Bianca learned she would have to respect her body as the church preached. Berta Guevara, a lector at Saint Benedict’s Parish, meets with most honorees to talk about such sexual transformations before their quinceañera. She stresses that while they have matured, honorees have not quite entered into womanhood but have grown from *niña* (little girl) to *jóven* (youth). Warning that they are still young and especially vulnerable, Ms. Guevara says that Somerville youth need to respect their bodies and demand that same respect from others. Heidy came to reflect on this concept of womanhood when asked how she might prepare a quinceañera if she were to have daughter. For it to be a success, Heidy imagines, her daughter would have to understand what it means to be a good woman, to be dependable, and to care for herself. A good woman, Heidy defines as someone who follows her own mother’s example, even in her absence; a good woman behaves herself; and continues to make herself better, moving forward each day. Heidy spoke further about the responsibilities that one assumes as a woman, saying that she must leave her dolls behind and realize that she has to depend on herself instead of her

parents. Parents, Heidi says, have this same concept of womanhood. They believe they should be able to leave their daughter alone by age fifteen; upon return, the house should be in order and their daughter should have prepared dinner for the family. In Heidi's experience, the quinceañera gave her more self-confidence and did signal her shift in familial roles to that of a second caretaker.

Milagro Garcia, as a storeowner who deals with numerous quinceañeras every year, portrayed a similarly consistent, even fixed concept of womanhood. She says that cultural values and concepts of maturity easily transfer from one generation to the next. "Los papas son los que impulsan los valores morales y a los quince años los papas son los que mandan," (parents drive the moral values [inherent in this tradition], and at fifteen years of age it is still the parents that rule). Although Ms. Garcia sees symbolic significance in the quinceañera and its traditional signal of one's entrance into womanhood, she certainly distinguishes between a fifteen-year-old and a full-fledged adult. Still Ms. Garcia placed continuous emphasis on the way that culture passes seamlessly from one generation to the next. In fact, she contends that there is little difference between the performance of quinceañeras in El Salvador and in Somerville, Massachusetts. "Casi es lo mismo...casi todos tienen el mismo concepto [de pasar a la adolescencia]," (it is almost the same...almost everyone has the same concept [of a girl's passage into adolescence]), she assured me. According to Ms. Garcia, whether one is from the Caribbean, North, Central, or South America the quinceañera means the same thing—there is no difference in the way that girls understand coming of age across cultural and national landscapes. Surprised at this apparent rigid cultural concept of coming of age and stagnant understanding of culture, I asked Ms. Garcia to expand on

this idea. With respect to the quinceañera, it is as if all Latin Americans share one culture, she states, “como si fuéramos de la misma, casi tienen las mismas culturas en ese aspecto de las quinceañeras. A veces el sistema americano usa el dieciséis y no quince.” Sometimes in the United States they celebrate the sixteenth birthday, however, she clarified.

It is important to take into account Ms. Garcia’s relationship to the quinceañera. Owner of a Somerville specialty store, Doña Milagro’s, Ms. Garcia interacts with a select population around the quinceañera and has a strictly Latina clientele. It may be that the girls who look for dresses in stores like Doña Milagro’s happen to share a more consistent set of values with their parents, while others who shop at mainstream chain stores find bicultural influences to be truer to their experiences. It is also worth qualifying that Somerville’s Salvadoran community is relatively new. Another look at the values embedded within the quinceañera after two or three more generations of the community’s integration into Somerville will certainly show changes in the performance and greater influence from dominant cultures.

“Yes! I am Latina ... Yes! I just had my quinceañera!”

Chapter 2: Quinceañeras Impacting Identity

The quinceañera, as any cultural practice, is jointly negotiated and created, constantly influenced by the context in which it occurs. As a ceremonial rite of passage so tied to the honoree’s identity, her language, race, self-perception, sexuality, and class all come to influence this cultural performance. In 2002, Jessica Tejada celebrated her quinceañera with a religious mass at Saint Benedict’s and a party to follow at the Welcome Project. Jessica’s bilingual sermon reflects a bicultural influence inherent in the performance. According to Jessica, besides her relatives who traveled from Lawrence, Massachusetts for the celebration, there were also “a lot of young people” and this changed the dynamics of the sermon. The priest judged the guests’ language ability and code switched depending on his intended audience. When the priest spoke directly to the younger people, he used Spanglish, and sometimes English. But, Jessica recalls, “When he had to make a point for everyone, he spoke in Spanish.” Everyone attending Jessica’s mass was Latino, but the priest recognized the diversity in language ability across Latino populations and adapted his sermon accordingly.

His willingness to code switch in this most traditional of Latin/o customs seems to signal his acceptance of (and accommodation to) the fact that Latinos exist on a cultural and linguistic continuum. They have had varying experiences in acquiring or learning English, though neither one is more authentically Latino than the other. While English

often resonates more with the younger generation, Spanish still serves as a meeting point for this Somerville community.

Heidy, also an American born Salvadoran, feels this same bicultural influence as Jessica, in her daily life. The rule has always been, Heidy said in an interview, that she hears, speaks, and writes Spanish inside the house. The outside could teach her English, but inside the house was a place to experience Salvadoran culture. Both Heidy's grandmother and great-grandmother cultivated Salvadoran culture in the Castro house by passing down traditions like making tortillas. In part due to their influence, Heidy reflects, "Yo me siento más salvadoreña que Estados Unidos," (I feel more Salvadoran than American). When she was young, Heidy remembers looking at fifteen year olds celebrating their birthdays and told her parents that she too wanted to have a quinceañera.

Reflecting back on that celebration, Heidy says that the quinceañera strengthened her sense of community and brought her closer to those that attended. Many people who attended her party were adults that she had never spoken to before and only knew through her parents. A girl opens herself to the community through the quinceañera, Heidy explained. The quinceañera did not act as her presentation to society in that she was now ready to marry and be courted, but rather as a community builder. Heidy found that having a quinceañera enhanced her status within the Latino community, making boys and adults alike take notice of her and respect her as a young woman. While Heidy's life has always reflected a fusion of American and Salvadoran cultures, the quinceañera helped to bring her closer to that Salvadoran community of which she always knew she was a part but to which she had not been formally introduced.

Jessica views the quinceañera in a similar light, emphasizing its communal purpose. She describes her dance with her father as the most special moment of the night, and happily remembers how the other guests watched from afar, blowing bubbles around the pair. Afterwards she made sure that everyone danced to the DJ's reggae, reggaetón, and bachata. "It wasn't just a party for me," she reflects, "I was glad because I felt like everyone had fun and not just me." For Jessica, this event allowed her to celebrate a period of growth in her life, but it was a community and family event as well.

While Heidi and Jessica note that the quinceañera deepened their relationship to the Latino community and status within, for Bianca Salazar the way the event changed how others see her Latina identity was also important. Conscious of the fact that her light skin could lead others to label her as White, Bianca was especially excited to have a quinceañera, which she considers a marker of Latinidad. Bianca explains, "Seeing that people tend to think I'm white kinda made me be like, "Yes! I'm a Latina." I can go into school saying, "Yes, I just had my quinceañera.' And everyone would be like 'Oh, so what's *that*?' And I'd be like 'Oh, it's a Latin thing.'" Bianca feels frustrated when others neglect to acknowledge her Latinidad and immersion in Somerville's Latino community, mistaking her for White. Despite the lived experiences that contradict this rigid definition, White and Latina are often seen as mutually exclusive terms in the United States. Bianca's experiences are indicative of race's fluid nature and how categories of White and Latina *can* simultaneously exist. Therefore the actual performance of the quinceañera, served as something tangible that Bianca could identify as Latino culture for the outside world so tempted to categorize her. While Bianca's concept of Salvadoran culture or Latinidad cannot actually be defined by one cultural

performance, for her, the custom sufficed to silence those who might question her identity. Bianca concludes, “So it makes me feel proud of myself being able to say [I celebrated my quinceañera]—unlike when people’d be like, ‘So, are you White?’ It’s like, ‘No, I’m not. I might look it, but I’m not.’ So, it feels pretty good.” For Bianca, the performance came to serve as proof that her light skin was no indication of her ethnicity—Bianca was a Salvadoran Latina. Jessica, in contrast, did not see her quinceañera as a rite of passage into the Latino community or as a symbol of her Latinidad. Rather, it stood for her self-development and valued family traditions.

Ian F. Hany Lopez’s, “The Mean Streets of Social Race” illuminates the way that race has shaped individuals like Bianca and Jessica, who navigate their Latina identities and connect with the quinceañera in very different ways. According to Lopez, three elements combine to form one’s racial identity: chance, context, and choice. Chance, he states, is something unchangeable such as one’s appearance and ancestry; by chance, both girls are Salvadoran though with very different shades of skin reflecting their distinct ancestry. Context is “the social setting in which races are recognized, constructed, and contested,” (153) like Somerville, Massachusetts. And finally choice reflects the power one has over her racial identity in various contexts. While Bianca can pass as White, in cases where she can assert that she is a person of color, she does. Lopez assures,

[Some] people do choose to jump races, and their ability to do so dramatically demonstrates the element of choice in the micromechanics of race. It also demonstrates...[choices] about racial identity do not occur on neutral ground, but instead occur in the violently racist context of American society

(Lopez 156)

Racial relations in Somerville and in Bianca's family history have led her to assert a specifically non-White identity. She latches onto the quinceañera as symbolic of this choice (among many other motivating factors for the celebration of course) and the impact that being a Salvadoran Latina in Somerville has had upon her experiences. Because Jessica, in this same context, would not be viewed as any other race, she does not need to make that same choice as Bianca and distinguish herself from the White population.

Individual differences certainly set Bianca and Jessica apart, however here race proves to be a common feature that influences both their self-perceptions and their understanding of the quinceañera. Bianca is often called Blanca (White) as a term of endearment, whereas Jessica's family and friends refer to her as La Negra, a name that emphasizes her dark skin and visibly indigenous roots. Due to her skin tone, Jessica could never pass as anything but Latina—chance granted her darker skin and therefore unquestionable entrance into the Latino community. Bianca, however, wanting similar recognition, exerts power over her racial identity through the choice factor, and deliberately highlights this cultural event as emblematic of her Latinidad. This contrast between Jessica and Bianca is relevant in the way it shows how race plays out in a cultural performance and manipulates its significance. The U.S. groups Latinos under one label as if they constitute a monolithic and uniform population. Clearly, however, all Latinos are not experiencing this label in the same way. While the quinceañera is a custom that many Latin/o communities do maintain, the event does not exist in isolation and is shaped by both the community and the honoree's experiences. The honoree is constantly subject to external power systems that leave her raced, classed, and gendered,

as all people. These differences manifest themselves in the performance of the quinceañera and alter its significance.

One's class is another element of identity that weaves its way into the performance, influencing both the shape of the celebration and its significance to the honoree. Given the quinceañera's propensity towards conspicuous consumption and Somerville's status as a working class city, economic tensions have understandably arisen around the celebration. Each narrator spoke about their perception of spending and the quinceañera, a debate to be further explained in the following chapter.

“Tienen padrinos de todo...”

Chapter 3: Economic Factors in the Quinceañera

For quinceañera honorees, the quinceañera is like a wedding “...only without the groom,” many narrators quipped. Girls typically dress in gowns that reach to the ground and cost upwards of \$600. The honoree, accompanied by fourteen damas (bridesmaids), fourteen compañantes (their escorts), and her chamberlán (the honoree’s date), often rides from the church to her party in a limousine. There, they are professionally photographed, dance to music provided by a DJ or live band, eat a catered meal, and share a three-layer cake for dessert. Nelson Salazar says that such expenses total between five and ten thousand dollars. Norma E. Cantú’s study, “La Quinceañera: Towards an Ethnographic Analysis of a Life Cycle,” documents similar spending trends in the quinceañera through the experiences of several participants from two towns along the Tamaulipas Texas border, Nuevo Laredo and Laredo. “In 1962, we paid no more than \$30 for my dress. In the 1990s, a dress can cost anywhere from about \$100 to well over \$1,000 depending on the embroidery required and the cost of the fabric chosen.” Heidi Castro estimates that her family spent four thousand dollars on her quinceañera and items like the dress, flowers, cake, party space, photography, DJ, donation to the church, food, and recuerdos (mementos). According to the 2000 census, the average per capita income for Hispanics or Latinos in Somerville was \$16,490 compared to \$25,692 per capita income of its

White population (ePodunk 2004). Although few Somerville families have the kind of disposable income where they can afford five to ten thousand dollar birthday parties, the coming of age custom continues. While Heidy believes one should set limits on expenditures, she realizes that many families prefer to incur debts rather than have a more modest party for their fifteen-year-old. Many Somerville Latinos do modify the quinceañera to fit their budgets, though others certainly prioritize luxury and, as Heidy pointed out, would rather fall into debt than compromise their custom.

Even residents of Somerville's low-income housing developments have spent exorbitant amounts of money on their daughters' quinceañeras. While they may not have the five to ten thousand dollars that Mr. Salazar says many families do spend on the parties, in the past they have rented limousines, bought fancy dresses, and hosted affairs the size and extravagance of a wedding. Mr. Salazar, whose community organization "The Welcome Project" is located amidst one set of Somerville's public housing developments, assures this is true. The poor too, he alleges, have driven themselves into debt for a quinceañera; Mr. Salazar reflects on that fact by saying,

I have a hard time with that. Because it's something that's...more like for upper class. For me, that's always been an issue because usually the people that don't have are the ones that tend to imitate. It's kind of sad sometimes to see people who get in debt because they want to have the parties.

He explains that many families may rationalize this spending by looking at the quinceañera as the last party they will have for their daughters, the last big event before the wedding. Still, Mr. Salazar believes many others look to the upper class and to each other, constantly trying to affect wealth and to "do it better...almost like a competition." In his view, dating back to the European origins of the quinceañera, the custom's social

component has always facilitated an intentional exhibit of wealth, even when that wealth does not exist; in the context of Somerville, the result is a sad display of the poor emulating the rich. Mr. Salazar's perspective echoes that of bell hooks who states,

Tragically, the well-off and poor are often united in capitalist culture by their shared obsession with consumption. Often times the poor are more addicted to excess because they are the most vulnerable to all the powerful messages in the media and in our lives in general which suggest that the only way out of class shame is conspicuous consumption.

(hooks 46)

bell hooks exposes the way that capitalism has cultivated a belief that visible consumption signals success. Narrators disagreed, however, on the root of this mentality.

Mr. Salazar believes that Salvadoran tradition does not preclude this same desire to create a spectacle of the quinceañera. Remembering those fiestas he attended in El Salvador, Mr. Salazar says the level of excess certainly differed; Salvadorans did not dress in tuxedos or have limousines to bring them to the church, instead people had to walk. But Mr. Salazar assures, "the big thing about it was that people would *see* them walking home." The honoree, chamberlán, and fourteen damas and compañantes would parade in what Nelson remembers as a "circus" like fashion to and from the quinceañera. They were well aware and pleased at the idea that the community would emerge to watch the show of it all. Aside from its other social and religious functions, the point of the quinceañera was to make others take note of the ceremony's degree of extravagance. Mr. Salazar comments that while Latina quinceañeras have undergone certain changes, this is one tradition that has been preserved and finds its roots in Latin America.

Heidy, in contrast, remembers those quinceañeras she attended in El Salvador as simpler and attributes their now apparent materialistic quality to United States influence.

“En El Salvador yo fui a una quinceañera. Era un pocito más sencilla--no habia tanto lujo como aquí. Pero siempre las quinceañeras son bonitas allí,” she said. (In El Salvador I went to a quinceañera. It was a little simpler—not such luxury as there is here. But the quinceañeras are always nice [in El Salvador].) In fact, she believes that the tendency towards excessive spending has only become more extreme in Somerville; it is a product of younger generations. Heidy remembers her mother being quite resistant when the discussion of hosting a quinceañera first arose in the Castro house for this same reason. According to Heidy, her mother initially refused her a quinceañera, saying that now one would be too expensive—they are always too extravagant in the United States. Due to her daughter’s long-time dream of celebrating her quinceañera, Heidy’s mother eventually relented.

To explain how some Somerville Latinos manage to maintain this high level of luxury despite economic constraints, Heidy points to the increasing tradition of adopting padrinos¹. The honoree and her family delineate their expected costs for the fiesta and then ask others to assume a portion by contributing a specific item. Describing this tradition, Heidy spun off a litany of padrinos that one might search for, “que de zapatos, que del anillo, que de vestido, que de limousine, que de pastel, que de local, de música” ([padrinos] of the shoes, the ring, the dress, the limousine, the cake, the salon, the music). Heidy identifies the visible reliance on padrinos’ contributions as one difference between her own quinceañera and more recent ones (in the last six years). She described a greater vanity developing among girls today—a constant desire to be the object of attention by finding more padrinos and spending more money. Like Nelson Salazar, Heidy believes

¹ While padrinos literally means godparents in Spanish (padrino for godfather and madrina for godmother) the term refers to sponsors in the context of quinceañeras.

there is now a competitive element to the quinceañera. The honorees want to exceed what came before them, they want to prove themselves to their peers and to the community.

Heidy did not incorporate sponsors into her quinceañera. Her parents bought her the ring (to be blessed by the priest at the religious ceremony) and some aunts and uncles contributed to the quinceañera as well, but as their birthday gifts and not as padrinos, Heidy distinguishes. She says that her mother insists the padrino custom is a burden to others, “Yo no quiero poner cosas en otras personas. *Yo te traje en este mundo; yo te quiero celebrar tus quince años*” (I don’t want to put responsibilities on others. I brought you into this world; I want to celebrate your fifteenth birthday). The family refused to turn to relatives and the community for the sake of creating an unnecessarily luxurious event. Still, Heidy knows that most Somerville Latinos “tienen padrinos de todo” (have sponsors for everything). In fact, she says they find so many padrinos to assume partial responsibility for the quinceañera that the party is of practically no cost to the family. It should be noted, though, that despite Heidy’s assertion, some families do accumulate (and pay) tremendous quinceañera bills; of course there would not be cases of debt and bankruptcy if it were not for at least some personal spending.

Community perception of the padrino role certainly varies. For instance, Milagro Garcia agrees that families look for padrinos so that they spend less on the quinceañera, but says that if people want to help financially then that is fine. She also disagrees that sponsorship is a North American ritual, saying that South and Central Americans take part in it as well—she assures, if they can find padrinos to contribute, they will.

Heidy argues that asking others to act as sponsors is burdensome and a means of exhibiting vanity without undertaking the extra cost, though there is a dual purpose to this custom. Norma E. Cantú underscores, “The custom of sponsorship mainly serves a twofold function” (Cantú 1999). Beyond deflecting some of the financial burden away from the honoree’s family, she says it also “[provides] a social glue for the honoree between her immediate family and the rest of her family and friends” (Cantú 1999) Just as Heidy believes her quinceañera exposed her to and expanded her community, Cantú’s study reveals that some participants of the quinceañera find that asking others to serve as padrinos strengthens relationships and serves to honor those on both sides of the relationship. Adopting padrinos allows the honoree and her family to more deeply involve the community in this cultural tradition that is the quinceañera. Those contributing individuals become wrapped up in what is a milestone in the life of a fifteen-year-old, and a bond is established.² Parents are similarly able to interact with the larger community and create or strengthen relationships. Especially in immigrant communities where perhaps the social network is composed of fictive kin rather than extended family, sponsorship can be indicative of a cohesive community. Asking others to financially contribute to the quinceañera would lead one to believe that there is a level of trust and shared emotional connection among community members that may not be blood related. Thus the padrino custom becomes an adaptive feature among immigrant families in Somerville. In this process of contracting sponsors, then, the quinceañera proves its communal, as opposed to just individual, function.

² *La Quinceañera: Towards an Ethnographic Analysis of a Life Cycle Ritual* purports that the custom of padrinos likewise renews old bonds, as many baptisms also incorporate padrinos.

It may also be, that the community is aware of its economic constraints and the fact that, alone, few Somerville families would be able to sustain the quinceañera in its traditional form and extravagance. If this is true, then one may interpret the role of padrinos as a statement of the community's ability to come together and spend money as a unit. In this light, the system of sponsorship becomes an empowering, rather than degrading custom in the quinceañera. Economic tensions, however, remain in Somerville.

According to Norma E. Cantú, "the quinceañera dress marks a change in the wearer's status in the community," (Cantú 1999) in that it signals her transition from girl to señorita and availability for marriage. For many honorees in the Somerville Latino community, their perception of the quinceañera dress is also an indicator of their feelings related to class. Business owner Milagro Garcia gives insight into this market. Upon immigrating to the United States in 1988, Ms. Garcia opened a boutique that caters to women's quinceañeras, weddings, and graduation ceremonies. Her best form of advertisement has been her clientele (composed of Brazilians, Haitians, and Salvadorans), who spread news of the store by word of mouth. Somerville girls, she says, wear conservative dresses—they do not tend to be very extravagant, though they do try to look like princesses, dressed in long gowns, their heads adorned with tiaras. Dresses vary in color depending on the honoree's nationality or ethnicity; for example the traditional Colombian color is yellow, while the traditional Salvadoran quinceañera, referred to as the "fiesta rosa,"(rose party) dictates that girls select pink. Rarely would a girl choose a color like red or black for her quinceañera dress however, since the dress is intended to communicate her purity and innocence. Quite often, girls first go online to

quinceañera websites (of which there are many) or sites of various dress companies.

Later they visit Doña Milagro's with a specific image in mind that they hope to find. For those still unsure of what they are looking for, Ms. Garcia keeps catalogues with Latin American, Asian, and American styles—a bit of everything.

Jessica bought her tiara at Doña Milagros, but went to Building Nineteen in Lynn, Massachusetts for her jewelry, shoes, and dress. Jessica remembers that one friend's dress "was a gown, it looked like she was getting married, honestly." This, however, was not Jessica's goal. She realizes that many families spend more money on quinceañeras than she was prepared to on her own, "I don't think they should go all wild. But at the same time...maybe they're, like, you know this is something I want to remember, and this is the way I want to have it...I can't say anything to that." In picking out her own dress, Jessica looked for something more informal that she would be able to wear again. Hers was the traditional pink, a dress that reached to the floor with spaghetti straps and subtle bead embroidery.

Bianca had a similarly modest quinceañera and in an untraditional fashion, made all preparations in the weeks leading up to the day (as opposed to months before). She describes the celebration as a "last minute type of a thing," "really simple," and "somewhat elegant." Bianca's godmother offered to buy her quinceañera dress as a gift and took her shopping. They went to stores like Bloomingdales, Lord & Taylors, and Filenes, searching for an inexpensive dress, "sort of like a prom dress." She finally selected a lilac colored dress with spaghetti straps from Lord & Taylors. To complete the ensemble, Bianca's aunt styled her hair, braiding the front, and curling the back down to her hips. She wove purple and pink flowers throughout to complement the dress. Bianca

emphasized that her dress “wasn’t like this big puff wedding dress. It was like somewhat casual but not too casual so I guess it was kind of fancy...I’ve seen fancier but it was fancy.” Most girls wear “big puffs for dresses,” she mocked, a style that Bianca says she would have been very uncomfortable in, considering her quinceañera took place on a hot summer day in July. In retrospect, though, Bianca admits being somewhat regretful that she did not have a classic quinceañera, “I kind of wish now that I would have had gone with the pink, would have went traditional.” Despite the fact that these traditions do not exist in her family (Bianca’s mother did not celebrate her quinceañera), the Latino community’s traditions are valuable to Bianca. Her continuous emphasis on the difference between her own dress and a traditional one, though, seemed to imply that Bianca’s class consciousness also plays into how she looks upon her quinceañera.

Bianca, as my student partner, helped to interview Jessica and raised the topic of dress style. “If you could have your quinceañera again, and lets say you didn’t really have any limits of money, would you do it bigger and poofier, the dress?” she asked. Jessica replied, “It was something special for me, and I wouldn’t change it at all.” It should be noted though, that despite the way both Jessica and Bianca joked about such dresses, both implied throughout the interview that greater material in the dress indicates greater economic status—the “poofier” and bigger the dress, the more extravagant is was thought to be. For the honoree, the quinceañera dress, perhaps more than any other component, is reflective of class playing into the celebration, a performance of wealth.

While the Salvadoran quinceañera is closely tied to religion, this apparent materialistic element is at odds with the church’s religious agenda. Nelson Salazar recalls having to convince his local priest to say a mass for Bianca. Nelson explains, the

priest “doesn’t like to do quinceañeras,” and views their performance as ostentatious. The Salazars connected with the priest on this issue, though, and informed him that theirs would be a modest celebration, at which point he agreed and prepared a traditional ceremony that focused on Bianca’s transition from childhood to adulthood. Cantú cites a similar conflict saying, “Mara de la Luz Rodriguez Cárdenas recalls her quinceañera of 1960 where the priest refused to say a mass claiming it would be too much like a wedding (personal conversation).” Heidi Castro relates to this moral conflict, though, and says that although the most important quality of a quinceañera is the way that it presents a young woman to god, many girls are forgetting, never absorbing, or replacing this religious value with a consumerist one. Still, since the quinceañera is not an official sacrament, whether the priest obliges and conducts a religious service is up to his own discretion.

Daisy Gómez, director of C.C.D. at Saint Benedict’s, admits that she too was initially reluctant to accept the quinceañera as a religious event. Preempting her statements about economic tensions, Ms. Gómez clarified that she is by no means modern, but old school, very traditional, and very much a devout Catholic. Seeing all of the poverty, hunger, homelessness in the world and especially in Latin America, Ms. Gómez could not only not relate to a family that would spend thousands on a quinceañera, but she also considered it a sin to do so. She could not understand why such families would not live more humbly and send six of the eight thousand they might spend on a quinceañera, to families struggling in Latin America. This was how she viewed quinceañeras from the beginning, and in many ways continues to see them. Ms. Gómez could never fathom spending fifteen thousand dollars on a party, and would rather give

that money to another—whether she knew that person or not. “Este mundo está lleno de necesidades, no, y va un poco contra nuestra fe también,” (This world is full of need, right, and it also goes a bit against our faith) she says of sustaining this materialistic aspect of quinceañeras. Catholics are supposed to value and assume poverty—though not misery, she discerns—and to live humbly. While Daisy Gómez, a Cuban American, and the Salvadorans of Saint Benedict’s share the Catholic religion, they certainly do not share an understanding of the quinceañera. She points out that upon her entrance into the Saint Benedict’s community, “En realidad, ellos [los salvadoreños de San Benito] me enseñaron a mí!” (In reality, they [the Salvadorans of Saint Benedict’s] taught me!) By interacting with and listening to this community, Daisy Gómez came to a new understanding of the quinceañera’s relationship to the church.

She has since watched families, poor families, work multiple jobs to earn enough money to host a quinceañera and has witnessed their sacrifice. Mothers want to give their daughters what they never had. This too, Ms. Gómez believes, is valid—“también los pobres sueñan,” (the poor also dream). It is perfectly legitimate, she argues, to want for your children what you never had.

Bianca Salazar relates to this concept as she envisions her own daughter’s fifteenth birthday celebration, saying she would start saving money for the quinceañera the moment her daughter was born. “I would want something big for her, I want to make it special, have everyone there that she wants and like have it with all the damas and the chamberlán, and make it that whole big thing cause I wasn’t able to do it,” she says. Her mother did not have a quinceañera, which is why having given her a quinceañera at all was a big deal. Bianca assures she enjoyed her own quinceañera, though because she had

not previously been to one, she hadn't an idea of what a more conventional celebration could look like. With more money spent, her friends have had "prettier" quinceañeras, with "more of a party atmosphere," something of which Bianca is certainly jealous. She jokes, "I probably would go to the extreme--whether she liked it or not. I'd be like, 'You're having one!'" Clearly Bianca would like to continue this tradition of giving more to the next generation and understands how this might be a motivating factor for many to indulge in their daughter's quinceañera.

Milagro Garcia points to this very idea by saying, every person has their own way of making themselves happy and if it is through hosting a decadent quinceañera, then so be it. A mother of two daughters, Ms. Garcia did not give either one a quinceañera—there was no question, she could not spend the money. In Ms. Garcia's innumerable interactions with honorees and their families, though, she has noticed that "las mamás disfrutan a veces más la fiesta que las muchachas" (sometimes the mothers enjoy the parties more than the girls). Since Somerville's Latino population largely stems from a 1980s wave of immigration, many individuals represent the first of their families to have *made it* to the United States. They have migrated and reestablished themselves and communities, creating a home and a new opportunity out of Somerville. An elaborate quinceañera, in this respect, may be symbolic of a family's immigration success and their ability to retain culture despite a new social, political, and economic landscape. Mothers who own this tradition for the first time or moving beyond their own modest quinceañera signal to their families and communities new and old, their enhanced status in a new nation. Moreover, it is a way for parents to connect their child to the home country, to

give them that same tangible piece of Latinidad that Bianca says she found in her quinceañera.

Families work night and day, but they satisfy the dream. This dream, Ms. Gómez says, first belongs to the parents, who then slowly instill it in their children. She went on to explain by drawing an analogy to a woman who dreams of her wedding day all her life and instills this dream over the years in her child. The girl looks to other role models, sisters, cousins, and brides and a desire for the same wedding grows within her, “como un virus...y germina y llega el momento en que tu dices esto es lo que quiero para mi!” (like a virus...and it grows and then arrives the moment when you say this is what I want for myself!” A baby is not born with this image of the perfect wedding or quinceañera. The first time a girl starts to think about her wedding day, Ms. Gómez believes, is on her first communion—dressed beautifully in white with a crown on her head, it is as if she is a miniature bride. This image is then modified in the quinceañera. Once a mother’s dream for her daughter, the girl learns to want the same thing, “es un sueño compartido—un sueño que comienza con los padres y lo pasan a los hijos y lo es copartido” (it is a shared dream—a dream that begins with the parents and they pass it to the children and there it is shared.) Together, they bring the dream to life.

Bianca, Jessica, and Heidi each collaborated with their families to attain this dream, taking partial financial responsibility for their quinceañeras. Bianca’s wages from her summer job enabled her to pay for a professional manicure, a privilege she had never enjoyed before. At first, Jessica was unsure whether she would even have a quinceañera. She explains, “It was too expensive and all that stuff...But I started working and with the money that I earned and my mom helped me too, we had the quinceañera and I just

wanted a simple thing, like something to remember.” Aware of the sacrifices a quinceañera implies, Jessica decided to work at Mystic Mural, a community beautification project. “For me it wasn’t worth it to waste so much money,” she says, and decided to have a relatively formal party. Like Jessica and Bianca, Heidy worked to earn money for her family and her quinceañera. At age fourteen she began working at a book company making book covers, then at a restaurant at night, and eventually in a pharmacy. These honorees’ each played an active role in their celebrations. While they may have compromised their parties due to economic constraints, the contributions they did make allow each to enjoy a special ownership over their quinceañeras that they might not otherwise.

Ms. Gómez, with a new understanding of the Salvadoran quinceañera and its significance, generally welcomes the celebration at Saint Benedict’s. She does, however take issue with the way that families so quickly forget the church and its needs. The church concentrates on helping old, disabled, vulnerable people and at the same time needs to take care of heating, maintaining the religious school, etc, Ms. Gómez emphasizes. Meanwhile, families want the space to hold a religious ceremony, light, heating, lessons, a priest, and music. They want to spend eight to ten thousand dollars on a party she says—on dresses, limousines, and flowers—but are reluctant and resentful when they are asked to contribute two hundred dollars to the church to cover its expenses. She continued to say, every bunch of flowers families have delivered to the church costs between eighty and one hundred dollars, and they often order up to five; they send away for invitations; they send away for dresses. All this, she says, is done painlessly; but when the church asks for a donation of two hundred dollars, that is suddenly too

expensive and the family does not have the money. In her view, families should have the consciousness to donate to and take care of the church for all that it contributes to the ceremony. Over the years this is one area in which Ms. Gómez has had to negotiate with the community, though she admits that nowadays families do not protest as they initially did and are much more willing to give.

Despite this stated conflict over excessive spending and financial responsibility for the church's quinceañera expenses, Daisy Gómez says that there are instances when the church will sponsor a quinceañera itself. When a tradition is healthy, strong, beautiful, and important to the family the church must respect it and accommodate. This is especially true, Ms. Gómez asserts, in cases of extreme poverty, where a family has no means of providing a quinceañera or negotiating funds within the community. Then, Daisy Gómez, in conjunction with Saint Benedict's, attempts compensate for the family's lack of funds. She reflects on one such event, saying, the church made sure the family would be able to have the most beautiful mass and refused to accept any money donation. The choir provided the loveliest music and, Ms. Gómez assures, it was worth it.

“You’ll see, San Benito’s is like big family”

Chapter 4: The Religious Component of Quinceañeras

Perhaps the best place to experience this Salvadoran community is through Saint Benedict’s church. On a Sunday early in December 2004, I attended an 11:30am Spanish mass there with one Tufts student and another Somerville high school student. The church quickly filled, as hundreds of young Latino children from four to seventeen walked over from Sunday school, just a block away. Along the path between the two buildings, they joined parents, cousins, and siblings, though it was hard to tell who was related to whom. Every one of the hundreds of parishioners seems to know each other. They greet each other with smiles and a kiss on the cheek, a warm handshake. The mass did not start for several minutes. Almost every seat taken, women still paced the aisles, rocking babies until the director called into a microphone that mass would begin. Many toddlers walked freely about the church, their mothers eyeing their movements, though comfortable in this safe community. Teenagers and adults casually picked up wandering children, praised them with glowing smiles, and then passed them to the next person. I watched as my friend Jessica lifted a boy who was no more than two-years-old onto her lap. She must have held him for twenty minutes, kissing his cheek and responding to his inquisitive demeanor by marveling at stained glass or the details of the figures at one Station of the Cross. He went back and forth between the two of them comfortably for the remainder of mass. While the two women had never met, they recognized each other from previous masses and there was an unspoken level of trust they shared. Jessica explained to me, “You’ll see, San Benito’s is like a big family.”

The quinceañera is just one shared tradition that has proven to integrate new members into this family and make it stronger. Because of such success, Saint Benedict's Parish has basically institutionalized the ceremony. Bianca explains, "Before you do your confirmation you have to be like sixteen, seventeen. So the quinceañera usually happens and that's probably the beginning of your first year or two when you start doing your confirmation." Now considered a mature member of the community, the honoree strengthens her relationship with the church by preparing for her quinceañera. Bianca points out that basically every female who attends the Spanish masses at Saint Benedict's has or will have a quinceañera. "So it's almost...required in a sense, but not necessarily," she says, meaning that if her relationship with the church is to advance, a girl is expected to initiate that growth with her quinceañera. While the quinceañera is not a sacrament, the Latino community and Saint Benedict's have found a formal way to integrate the custom into its traditions.

On the day of her quinceañera, the honoree stands before a priest and her congregation, ready to enter a new stage of life. The priest blesses her new ring and necklace, and she offers a bouquet of flowers to the Virgin Mary asking for continued guidance and protection. C.C.D. director Daisy Gómez distinguishes the Salvadoran quinceañera as "unida muy intimamente con la religión" (tied very closely to religion), more so than the Cuban tradition. The religious mass however, interlaces social values into the quinceañera, communicating an honoree's renewed dedication to both Christianity and her community. It grants the honoree space for self-expression, as so many choose to read a poem dedicated to their parents. Usually, she thanks them for the work they have put into the quinceañera and the sacrifice that this celebration implies.

The mother or father will then often read their own poem dedicated to their daughter, Ms Gómez says, after which the whole family becomes emotional and cries. At Saint Benedict's, the religious component of the quinceañera is a mass of thanksgiving, one that communicates values of both piety and community.

Daisy Gómez says that the girls must attend C.C.D. at Saint Benedict's every Sunday from 10:15-11:00 to show that they are committed to Catholicism and that the quinceañera does in fact have religious meaning for them. As director of this program, Ms. Gómez and her assistant and Saint Benedict's lecturer, Berta Guevara, hold two charlas or informal meetings, one with the honoree and the other in which her family joins. These talks, Ms. Gómez says, are based on "tópicos de actualidad" (everyday topics) such as concepts of respect, morality, the importance of education, what it means to be a good citizen, and the relationship between people and God. The quinceañera provides churches the opportunity to "caminar con ellos [las familias], llevarlos de la mano, acompañarlos o que ellos nos lleven a nosotros" (walk with them [the families], take them by the hand, accompany them, or that they carry us). Having institutionalized the quinceañera, Saint Benedict's can take advantage of the event by communicating on a more personal level with individuals of the congregation. Berta Guevara uses these charlas to talk with youth about the prospects of becoming a nun. She says this is the time when they may realize that God is touching them in a special way, that they have some sort of calling. Sometimes youth just need someone to reassure them of that feeling and offer them the opportunity to become further engaged in the church. Ms. Guevara views the quinceañera as that perfect opportunity, and readily finds ways to integrate willing youth into Saint Benedict's. The church's use of the quinceañera as a recruitment

tool is quite intentional, and at least according to Ms. Guevara and Ms. Gómez, has been a success.

In efforts to further engage youth and ensure their retention in the congregation, Saint Benedict's extends itself beyond the religious and into the social realm of its Latino community. Berta Guevara attempts to relate to the girls through her charlas and speaks candidly about the dangers of bad influences, prostitution, and gangs, all of which she claims are very real problems in Somerville. Pointing to visible problems of teen pregnancy in the community, Berta warns youth of the dangers of premarital sex and how being a young mother can affect and change their everyday lives. With hopes of empowering honorees, Ms. Guevara contrasts these negative images with those of youth invested in the church. The quinceañera acts as a tool to both ensure the longevity of the congregation and to connect the church with at-risk youth.

Through the quinceañera the church also gains access to the honoree's social circle. C.C.D. director, Daisy Gómez, points out that when one invites people to listen to their friend's mass, they often find themselves connected to something greater. Peers engage one another in the religious ceremony in a way that the church cannot. Ms. Gómez acknowledges that many people remember being forced into Christianity as children and because they were too young to appreciate its value, grew distant from the church. Often times these people will return as adults and come to embrace the religion they were born into. The quinceañera, Ms. Gómez believes, has many times been a factor in expanding and welcoming Christians back into the religious community. She assures that while one may return specifically for a quinceañera, that person will realize what he has lost over the years by distancing himself from the church. Ms. Gómez

speculates that God had these same intentions, for the quinceañera to give people another opportunity to renew their faith,

De cierta manera es una de los vínculos que establece Dios con la comunidad para que muchas personas que se habían alejado o nunca habían venido. Vuelvan de nuevo y por lo menos o si una vez más, vuelvan a saborear un poco lo que es la fe, la religión, nuestra iglesia.

In a certain way it's a link that God establishes with the community for all of those who have distanced themselves or have never come [to St. Benedict's]. They return again and at least or one more time, they come to savor a bit of faith, religion, and our church.

The quinceañera's social quality allows Saint Benedict's entrance into greater Somerville, facilitating its outreach and effect on the community.

“Es la oportunidad de hablar con los varones, no solamente la hembra”

Chapter 5: Fiestas Clavel: A Somerville-born Tradition

Until 2002, the Somerville quinceañera marked a young woman’s coming of age and rite of passage into the Christian Latino community. As narrators explain, that year, however, Somerville found a way to extend this ritual to young men of the community. According to Daisy Gómez, in 2002, there was a family who had a fifteen-year-old son that they wanted to present to the congregation during mass. This was not a special quinceañera mass but, she continues, the family wanted to thank God and tell him that their son was good. Ms. Gómez goes on to say that while one thanks God daily, the birthday is “un día más marcado,” (an especially marked day). Many choose to take advantage of the birthday to thank God and ask that they live one year more.

The following year two twins (a boy and a girl) celebrated their fifteenth birthday and had a joint quinceañera. Ms. Gómez said the celebration did not seem too strange to since the focus remained on the girl rather than the boy. Later, however, a mother approached Ms. Gómez asking that she help to prepare a quinceañera exclusively for her son, for since his birth she had been promising him a quinceañera, a ceremony in which she would present him to God and the community. The mother said that it was her son’s dream to have a quinceañera and requested that Ms. Gómez help arrange the conventional only adapted a bit for a boy. Ms. Gómez admits that though she did not tell the family, she was originally quite skeptical, “Sentí que igual al muchacho lo iba a traumatizar. Sentí que aun la mamá era una de estas mamás que son dominantes...Sentí que igual el muchacho sería centro de quizás de burla de otros varones, no, uno no sabe,” (I felt it

might traumatize the boy. I felt that this woman might be one of those domineering mothers...I felt that this boy might be the subject of ridicule among others, you know, one doesn't know). Ms. Gómez said she would have to meet with the boy alone, as she does with all other quinceañeras, to interview him and talk about his relationship with God and Saint Benedict's; she especially wanted to get a sense of his feelings and whether his mother was pushing him to have a quinceañera. She describes her first meeting with the boy, "un día me lo trajeron, y el muchacho estaba *feliz* con sus quince años—super, super, super feliz, emocionado, y esperando el día de sus quince años para llegar a la iglesia con la mamá, el papá y con los hermanitos, todo el mundo" (one day they brought him to me, and the boy was happy with his fifteenth birth—super, super super happy, excited, and awaiting his fifteenth birthday so that he could arrive at the church with his mother, father, brothers and sisters, and everyone). So, Ms. Gómez, the church, and the family went about making small adjustments to the quinceañera to suit this unique honoree.

Normally one refers to the quinceañera as the "fiesta rosa" (rose party) but since this one celebrated a boy, the mother decided to call it "fiesta clavel" (carnation party), finding the latter more masculine. On the day of his quinceañera, the boy arrived at Saint Benedict's dressed in a military suit, his family matching its blue color. According to Ms. Gómez, Heidi Castro, and Berta Guevara, the mass turned out beautifully and thus established the fiesta clavel. For the church, the first fiesta clavel, was a complete success in the way that it connected Ms. Gómez to this young man. "En realidad me ha resultado tremendamente lindo porque es la oportunidad de hablar con los varones, no solamente la hembra," (In reality it turned out beautifully because it is an opportunity to

talk with the males, right, not only females). She had the opportunity to hear what he was thinking, how he saw his life and his future, his relationship with his family, church, with the world. The fiesta clavel, Berta Guevara realizes, is a result of this one boy's enthusiasm over his fifteenth birthday, and a significance it held for him that Saint Benedict's had never witnessed in another boy. This eagerness pleases Ms. Guevara for, just as she had with girls in the past, she could attempt to connect with him on his excitement over a religious event. Ms. Guevara seized this opportunity to talk with the boy about his future in the church, this time encouraging his entrance into priesthood. Although she says the boy might not have genuinely considered the idea at the time, it may be a thought he returns to later in life so the prospect is worth mentioning. In any case, Saint Benedict's believes this boy was special; Ms. Gómez describes him as "limpio," (pure) and "sano," (healthy) making this particular quinceañera quite refreshing in this day and age. The church sees potential for him to deepen his relationship with the church, using the fiesta clavel as a jumping off point for further investment.

The three fiestas clavel that Saint Benedict's has had have all been much more modest presentations than those of young women. Ms. Gómez guesses that the boys more timid than the girls, and says that just because they have a quinceañera does not mean that they stop being men. "De todas maneras, las mujeres son mucho más escandalosas que los hombres," (In every way the women are much more scandalous than the men) she joked. While the boys attend the religious ceremonies and behave themselves extremely well throughout their fiestas clavel, "no andan con la pompa y el brillo de la hembra" (they don't go around with the same pomp and brilliance as the girl). In their revised form, Ms. Gómez assures that the fiesta clavel will become a popular

tradition. In fact, Ms. Gómez recently spoke to a priest friend of hers at another church telling him about the fiesta clavel. Elated at the idea of a fiesta clavel, the priest assured that he would adopt it in his church, liking the idea so much because the soul has no sex and all individuals should be able to present their souls to God. Ms. Gómez agrees there is no reason for the woman to always be the one that is wrapped up in religion while the man remains detached. Through the fiesta clavel, Ms. Gómez explains, the man declares that he too is the son of God, wants to have a relationship with God, and that he eventually wants to create a family with a religious base. Heaven, she assures, is open to all that have faith in whatever God and religion they choose, as long as it is a healthy one. Therefore, it is important that man find a way to establish this kind of relationship with God as well, and if the quinceañera helps this process, then the tradition should certainly continue.

Heidy Castro believes that the quinceañera will in fact catch on in the community, remember how her own brother wished to have one when he was a child. A younger sibling, Heidy's brother could not understand why she was so celebrated and that he would not be, or at least never in so formal a manner. Noting their son's genuine longing for a quinceañera, Heidy's parents started planning a smaller party for him. When his fifteenth birthday came, however, her brother changed his mind. Since his fifteenth birthday preceded the birth of the fiesta clavel, he worried that others would think him strange, echoing similar preoccupations as Daisy Gómez initially expressed. Heidy assures, however, that community has received those boys who have had quinceañeras very well and without ridicule. If her brother were just turning fifteen now, she is fairly confident that he would want a quinceañera and that this history of fiestas clavel would

make him less insecure. Boys, she believes, are looking for a connection to the church and something to mark their growth as members of society too. The fiesta clavel encourages that men similarly engage and invest in the community. It provides an opportunity for Saint Benedict's to show its appreciation of their commitment to Christianity and to create a relationship that the church hopes will develop into a long-lasting and mutually beneficial connection. Unclear whether this tradition is sprouting in other communities, the fiesta clavel may be Somerville's most marked contribution to the quinceañera tradition. It is a source of pride for the community and further encouragement that the church has and will continue to impact the lives of young people.

Final Remarks

A study on the quinceañera in Somerville shows how one tradition that is present across Latin American and Latino communities as a coming of age ceremony can take on the values of those who practice it. Each of the seven narrators, involved in the quinceañera as honoree, participant, provider, or religious leader have influenced the shape of this ritual and adapted it to their own needs. The quinceañera has proved itself a link to sending nations, between generations, and for outsiders, a point of entry into understanding Somerville. As an anthropology student, I have been enlightened listening to the stories of these various hospitable, gracious, and candid community members and truly learned the value of documenting oral history. Through one cultural ceremony, I have come to better understand race relations, local politics, class issues, gender identity, and connections between communities in Somerville. The final product, the compiled stories of seven individuals, is emblematic of this population's ability to adapt to new environments while retaining its identity.

As it is celebrated, the quinceañera really reflects Somerville's living history and over time will show the growth of this community in itself, but also in relation to the greater socio-cultural landscape. Somerville Latinos are part of a relatively new immigrant community and their cultural practices will continue to adapt and grow with the population. The following topics are those that I could not sufficiently address in the constraints of this semester-long project and would make interesting areas of future study.

1. Bicultural influences in the quinceañera. I entered into this project anticipating a more visible influence from dominant U.S. populations on the quinceañera.

Besides brief comments about changing music in the social celebration (i.e. a stronger presence of reggaetón) and Jessica's bilingual mass, narrators stressed the similarity between Somerville quinceañeras and those in Latin America. They all have deep connections to their sending nations and so the Somerville quinceañera does not symbolize one reaching back to her roots, for they are so connected to daily life. As Salvadorans establish deeper roots in Somerville, I hypothesize that they will find bicultural influences to be more salient, and perhaps even incorporate the Anglo-American population into these celebrations.

2. Sexuality in the quinceañera. I did not delve deeply into this topic during interviews. I felt that as a Tufts University student disconnected from the Somerville Latino population, it might be inappropriate or invasive for me to ask about the girls' sexual experiences. It took me about a month to really learn about the quinceañera as it exists in Somerville; to get to know the community; and to understand how and in what context people discuss the quinceañera. I was reluctant to introduce a topic that could be perceived as taboo when I was so briefly entering the community. However there is surely a wealth of information in this subject area. Some preliminary questions I would suggest are:
 - a. How does the church and community regard honorees who are not virgins?
 - b. Has having premarital sex kept many girls from having a quinceañera in Somerville?
 - c. How do parents communicate values around sexuality in the context of the quinceañera?

- d. Who makes the rules about quinceañeras and an honoree's sexual activity—is it the church, family, peer group, or greater Somerville?
3. The fiesta clavel. A later study would examine whether the fiesta clavel has indeed become a trend in Somerville; how peer groups perceive the celebration; and what values are distinctly communicated to males in Somerville.

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